

THE COMMUNIST PARTY OF NEW ZEALAND 1921 - 81

**some developments in the history
of the Communist Party and the
Working Class in New Zealand
~ a summary~**

Sixty years ago, at Easter in 1921, a group of workers formed the Communist Party of New Zealand at a conference in Wellington. Delegates came from Napier, Wellington, Petone, Christchurch and the West Coast. This was a historic moment in the battle of this country's workers to liberate themselves from capitalism, a battle which continues to this day.

early working class struggles

Ever since the European colonisation of New Zealand, beginning in the 1840s, there has been class struggle between workers and employers. In the first decades, the city working class was small and unorganised but there were struggles to achieve the eight hour day and for improved wages and conditions. The unemployed also met and organised.

Trade unions began to be established, expanding rapidly in the late 1880s. Seamen, watersiders, and miners formed the backbone of the first national trade union organisation, the Maritime Council. A national strike was waged in 1890, but was defeated, and working class organisation was set back for a period.

The creation of an independent workers' movement was also set back by the political dominance of Seddon's Liberal Party amongst the workers. This was a period of rapid economic expansion in New Zealand, based on the development of refrigeration, which enabled foodstuffs to be exported in mass to Britain. Britain was the richest imperial power at that time in the world, based on widespread colonial exploitation. By letting a small part of these riches filter to her workers, Britain provided a big stable market for New Zealand foodstuffs. Capitalism worldwide was on the upswing of the boom-slump cycle.

These economic conditions promoted a period of "liberal" social reform under Seddon. In particular, the Conciliation and Arbitration Act, passed in 1894, was designed to "encourage the formation of industrial unions". This was supported by many unionists, but as Pat Hickey pointed out in his "Red Fed Memoirs", it also meant that: "Unions existed, not as fighting battallions in a Workers' Army, but merely as revenue-paying propositions that made possible office equipment, salaries and the expenses entailed in securing awards."

From around 1906, a new wave of industrial unrest spread around the world, as the capitalist boom busted. In New Zealand it was refected in several ways. There was the formation of the Socialist Party (1906), which gained a membership of 3,000 and carried the ideas of socialism, as they were then known, all over New Zealand. Members included Pat Hickey, Bob Semple, and Paddy Webb.

And there was a rebellion against meek union acceptance of Arbitration Court decisions, which had pegged wages behind price rises. In 1909, the "Red" Federation of Labour was formed, with an outlook of direct class struggle. Its preamble stated: "The working class and the employing class have nothing in common."

Its origins were from the miners, especially on the West Coast, but it drew in watersiders, labourers, shearers, and others. A national paper, the Maoriland Worker, was distributed, which included writings from Marx, as well as other forms of unscientific socialist trends. Many struggles were successfully waged under Federation leadership.

But the employers were to counterattack. In May 1912, the Waihi strike broke out. It was provoked by the Waihi Gold Mining Company who set out to form a scab union in place of the Red Fed local. The full power of the state was used to help the bosses, and during the reign of terror that followed, the striker F.G.Evans was murdered. With the assistance of union leadership outside the Federation - craft unions - the strike was smashed.

Shortly afterwards, in 1912, a Unity Conference was held between representatives of the Federation of Labour and the (craft union) Trades and Labour Councils. This resulted in the formation of a Social Democratic Party, which had a marked Marxist flavour. In 1916, this was to give way to the Labour Party, as we know it now, which turned away from any association with Marxist ideas.

Shortly after the Waihi strike, in 1913, yet a greater strike broke out. It began with the virtual lockout of the Wellington waterfront, spread to Auckland and other ports, and involved drivers, coalminers, labourers and other sections. Many fierce clashes with police and strikebreakers occurred. But again, the state force, supplemented by "special constables", defeated the strikers.

This defeat was followed by the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Strikes were outlawed and militant unionism received a serious setback. The Red Federation swiftly collapsed. A contributing factor, besides the Maritime strike defeat and the war, was that the movement, though militant, was full of reformist ideas and had no firm theoretical basis. The ideas of Lenin and the Bolsheviks - on the state, on imperialism, on the Party etc - were not known yet in New Zealand.

formation of the cpnz

Marxism had, by this time, been introduced into New Zealand. As early as 1909, Marxist studies and discussions were conducted in Wellington, and in 1911, J.B.King arrived from America to establish a branch of the IWW. Their activity consisted of holding street meetings, conducting study classes, and publishing a small paper, "The Industrial Worker".

Although these early teachings of Marx were limited to the bare outline of his economic theories, there was still enough to give a number of workers an understanding of the method and nature of capitalist exploitation. As a result, there was created a determined militant influence in several unions.



An early Marxian students class, Blackball, 1917.

By 1914-15, other classes had been established in Blackball and other areas of the West Coast. These classes became the centres for the importation and distribution of socialist literature from America, Canada, and England.

Marxist students had by this time broadened their understanding of Marxism and had for some time concentrated on the study of philosophy. Using such books as "The Communist Manifesto", "Socialism, Utopian and Scientific", and "The Paris Commune", Marxist students became a leading influence in many of the mines and won official positions in the unions. As well, they carried on consistent agitation against the war and conscription as a practical application of Marx's teaching on war.

After the victorious Russian revolution (1917), and the formation of the Communist International (1919), there took place throughout the world the formation of independent Communist Parties, from amongst the most revolutionary class conscious workers. A revolutionary wave swept the world in the immediate post war period.

In New Zealand, by the year 1919, a considerable number of students had advanced sufficiently to recognise the need for some form of central organisation in order to move widely and systematically propogate Marxism amongst the working class. As a result, a meeting was held in Christchurch during the Christmas holidays of 1919, to form the Marxian Students Association.

Debate raged within the Association between those who wanted to confine themselves to propoganda and the organisation of study classes, and those who wanted active participation and leadership in the workers' struggles. Those who supported the second policy were to the fore in the formation of the Communist Party of New Zealand at the Easter conference in 1921. There were representatives from the Marxian Association and the Wellington Socialist Party. Delegates came from Napier, Wellington, Petone, Christchurch and the West Coast. They included F.P. Walsh, who was later to leave the Party and become head of the F.O.L., K. McL. Baxter, who became Secretary of the F.O.L. and helped Walsh in his later anti-Communist crusades, and Alex Galbraith and Bill Woods, who were to play leading roles in the Party for many years.

It was decided to affiliate to the Communist International, and E.J.Dyer was appointed first secretary. A manifesto was issued, based on the Bolshevik manifesto of 1903. Branches of the Party were established in Napier, Blackball, Millerton, Christchurch, Wellington, and Auckland (where a branch had been first formed in 1920).

early experiences of the party

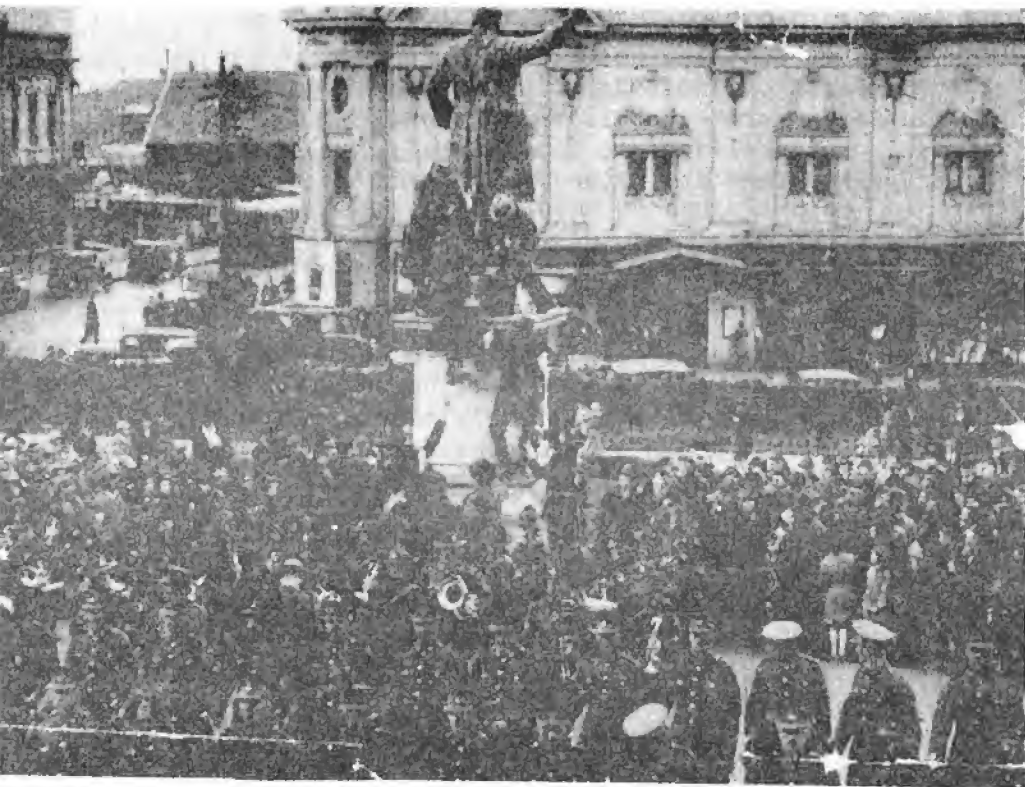
There were early difficulties in building the Party, and headquarters moved from Wellington to Auckland to Wellington to the West Coast and back to Wellington again by 1929. Over this period it played a relatively minor role in the working class movement, though it had considerable influence amongst the miners and timberworkers of the West Coast.

However, right from the start, the ruling class considered the Party a threat and used war regulations to suppress its activities. These prohibited the printing, publishing etc, of "any document which incites, encourages, advises or advocates lawlessness or disorder, or expresses any seditious intention." A number of Party members were prosecuted and some jailed for selling working class literature and for giving lectures.

By the year 1931, the Party was struggling to overcome a number of weaknesses, primarily on an organisational level, that had prevented a strong base being built amongst workers in the basic industries. A strong campaign was mounted against social reformism. This, combined with mass agitation and concentration in the unemployed workers' struggles, were to lead to dramatic developments within the Communist Party.

It was the great economic crisis and the drive towards fascism and war, which started in New Zealand in 1930-31, that brought the Party into the field as a definite force in the working class movement.

The Party's leadership and support for the unemployed combined with its links with the day to day struggles of workers, won it wide respect and support. Especially amongst the unemployed, the Party, through the Unemployed Workers Movement, played a leading role organising relief workers' strikes, marches, demonstrations, and deputations. There was also activity against evictions and to defend free speech.



During the depression, the Communist Party was active in organising the unemployed. The above photo shows the arrest of agitators on the Seddon memorial at the opening of parliament in 1934. Two Party members were involved, Alec Blanche and Bill O'Reilly.

The Party did not during this period limit its work to only the unemployed. It played a leading role in establishing and building the Working Women's Movement, as well as the Friends of the Soviet Union. The former built up around the Party paper Working Women, and was to organise women in the fight against unemployment as well as the threats of fascism and war.

By 1937, the Communist Party had launched many major campaigns against fascism. Aid had been organised for Spain and some members and supporters fought as members of the International Brigade in Spain.

FILIACION	
Estatura	5' 2"
Pelo	Brown
Ojos	Brown
Cara	Medium
Barba	Short
Marla	Regular
SEÑAS PARTICULARES	
H. R. Bryan	
Fecha de nacimiento	18-10-1908
Lugar de nacimiento	Edmonton, (New Zealand)
Nacionalidad	Britanica
Profesión	Marinero
Estado civil	Soltero
DOMICILIO:	Pais New Zealand
	Pueblo Dunedin
Calle	Madison St., núm 53
Partido Político	Antifascista
Fecha de entrada en las B. V. 11-3-38	




This shows a photocopy of an identity card for those fighting with the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War. This particular one was issued to H.R. Bryan, a New Zealand Party member.

During this whole period of the 1930s and into the 1940s. the state considered the Party a threat to its existence and there were few months that one of its leaders was not in jail. In fact during 1933, the entire Central Committee was jailed.

Considerable progress had been made with industrial branches having been established in several centres. The end of the 40s showed the Party organisation had extended to secondary centres and country areas. But a great number of the new members, the majority from sections allied to the working class, came to the Party simply on the basis of the victories of Stalin's Red Army during the early 1940s.



C.P.N.Z. Conference, 1946, in Auckland.

the 1951 lockout & after

The end of the decade saw the Labour Party and the F.O.L attempting to smash the Communist Party and any militancy that existed within the labour movement. The Carpenters' Union, after a long and bitter struggle, was deregistered and broken in 1949. The Labour government then amended the law so that the scab union the bosses formed would replace the deregistered one. This was one of the areas of Party influence outside the maritime unions.

The trade union movement in 1951 was badly split. This was the year of the wharfies lockout, or the "151 Days", one of the major struggles waged by the New Zealand working class and one in which the Party participated.

The class struggle had intensified over the previous few years and several unions such as the wharfies and the seamen had been able to gain wages and conditions far superior to those workers in less essential and smaller industries. In doing so, they had acted as the leading force in the trade union struggle of the working class, and improved the wages and conditions of all workers. Hence the ruling class knew that by smashing these leading unions, it was attacking the working class movement as a whole, and lowering living standards right across the board.

The right wing trade union bureaucracy consciously assisted the government and the employers in their campaign to isolate the wharfies, painting them as overpaid and underworked in comparison with other workers. As a result, the Watersiders Union was smashed, and the trade union movement was exposed to the full force of class dictatorship.

Generally speaking, the Party's work in the trade unions at this time was based on a policy of taking positions rather than building the Party on the job. More often than not, Communists were elected as good trade unionists and the individual had the influence rather than the Party. This tendency lasted in the Party until the expulsion of the Manson and Bailey group in Wellington in 1970.



Carpenters Union demonstration in Auckland, 1949. The Party was influential in this union at the time and the photo shows Roy Stanley, first on the right, as well as Don McEwen, second from the left in the front row.

The absence of an all-sided Marxist analysis resulted in the Party submerging itself within the trade union movement, and insufficient work being done to raise the socialist political consciousness of the workers.

Although the Party had recruited large numbers from the working class and intellectuals during the 1940s, by the middle of the next decade, many had left, unable to withstand the pressure exerted by the state in its anti-Communist crusade, or as a result of the ideological debate that was beginning to consume the international Marxist-Leninist movement.

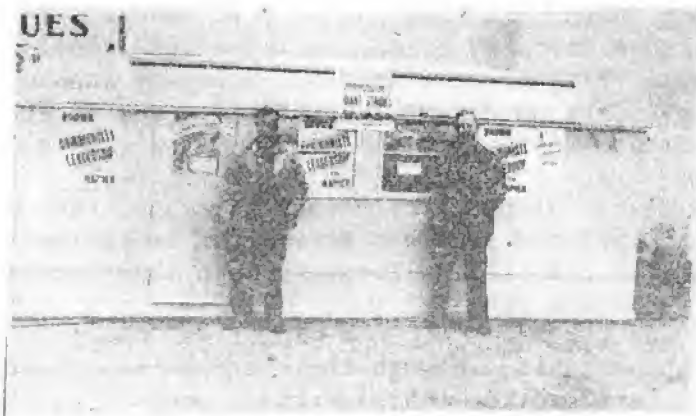
Social democracy had strengthened its hold on the trade union movement, and the Party had to wage a bitter struggle against reformism. From the late 1950s through to the early 1970s, the position of the working class was relatively stable. This was based on a relative stability of international capitalism, resulting from reconstruction of the immense damages of World War Two, as well as other factors.

Small skirmishes took place, which helped to reinforce the Party's view that working people have the ability to organise their own lives and look after their own needs without interference from big business or the state. They also helped to show the elements of the future organisation of production and exchange.

Over the past decade, Communists have been struggling to build strong rank and file participation in their unions, bringing socialist politics to the front in order to turn the trade unions into arenas of class struggle. There has also been participation and leadership in many progressive struggles, such as the anti-apartheid movement, the struggles for Maori and women's rights, against the growing drive to imperialist war and the drive to fascism in this country.

the international communist movement

Since World War Two, the international Communist movement, which had previously been united around Marxism-Leninism and in which the C.P.S.U. under Stalin played a prominent role, has been split up. This was primarily due to the betrayal of Marxism-Leninism by the new Soviet leadership after Stalin's death in 1953. This leadership has subsequently turned the Soviet Union into a major imperialist power, while retaining the label of "Communist" to deceive and confuse people.



A photograph taken in the 1950s at Napier outside the Party branch headquarters in that city. The two members pictured are, on the right, Mace, and on the left, Brown.

The C.P.N.Z. stood against this revisionist betrayal, which stand caused some members to break away and form the Socialist Unity Party. This is a party which today tries to capture the leading positions in the trade unions, without a mass base. It works for the election of the discredited Labour Party, a party openly in support of capitalism. The S.U.P. is promoted by the bourgeoisie media, as a real live tiger, which it is not. It is promoted to divert workers who are moving away from the Labour Party from the revolutionary views of the C.P.N.Z.

More recently, the Party has had to face up to the exposure of "Mao tse-tung Thought" as a variant of revisionism, and the Communist Party of China as one which had appeared to say correct things while its practice was opposite. It is apparent to those who will look, now, that the basis for China's present shabby alliance with U.S. imperialism was laid down during the period of Mao's leadership.

The position today is that the Communist Party of New Zealand remains loyal to Marxism-Leninism, and through all its struggles, has strengthened its understanding and practice of this philosophy. A large number of Parties are growing throughout the world with a similar revolutionary outlook.

A variety of "Communist" and "Socialist" groups exist in this country, some promoted by the ruling class itself, which serve to confuse the working class. All sorts of ideological currents are promoted to divert those who are seeking real change from Marxism-Leninism.

But in the course of practical class struggle, through its loyalty to the class and selfless service of it in the struggle for socialism, the C.P.N.Z. will cut through these currents and win wide support.

The trade unions, vital though their activities are to defend workers, are proving that in crisis conditions they cannot make any advances nor provide any real defence for the workers against the attacks of big business. Capitalism has nothing to offer. It cannot be reformed.

Even more than in 1921, it is a vital task for the working class to support and develop the C.P.N.Z. as its own instrument to end capitalism and set up genuine socialist rule. Without a strong Party, there is no hope of defeating the capitalist class.

from early members

EXTRACTS FROM A LETTER BY ANDY BARRAS, FOUNDATION MEMBER

My acquaintance with revolutionary Marxism dates back to the beginning of the last war (World War One), when I was a youth of 18. Prior to this, I had some acquaintance with Socialism as preached by men like Holland, Semple, Ted Howard, Scott Bennett, Walter Thomas Mills (the man from Milwaukee), Keir Hardie, who had toured N.Z., Tom Mann, Aldermann Hartley and a whole variety of moderates and gradualists and Fabians.

I became interested in Marxism through attending lectures held under the auspices of the W.E.A., along with my brother and E.J.Dyer. There, we came into contact with men like the late Geo. Winter and Fournier and a number of other Marxist students.

The movement at this time was very confusing. The Social Democratic Party was tending towards the right in its affiliation to and subsequent submergence within the Labour Representation Committee, later to become the N.Z.L.P. There also existed a number of sectarian Socialist groups...

During the 1913 Watersiders' strike, many of these people worked together, and during the anti-conscription fight there was a tendency towards a short-lived united front. But the opportunism of respectable trade unionist leaders prevented any mass struggle developing and the movement degenerated into a free speech fight in which a few militants braved the power of the State and were sent to gaol in consequence. As a result of the government bribing the miners, watersiders, and seamen by making them reserved occupations, all possibility of mass struggle was nipped in the bud and thereafter the opposition to the imperialist war became largely individual...

During 1917, I was working at Millerton on the West Coast and there I contacted a bunch of Marxists who were conducting a study. Many of these chaps were former members of the Socialist Party of Canada. Some had contact with the Socialist Party of Great Britain and the group as a whole had a share in the Kerr Publishing Company of Chicago. We used to import all the best Marxist publications that were available. The class discussed Marcy's "Shop Talks on Economics", Engel's "Socialism, Utopian and Scientific", Untermann's "Marxian Economics", and "Capital" (Vol 1).

During 1917-18, correspondence between a number of Comrades resulted in a conference being held in Christchurch at Xmas 1918. I was elected as a delegate from Millerton but couldn't make it because the law intervened and I was prevented from attending. However, I was in Christchurch and received a visit from some of the delegates whilst there. This conference established the New Zealand Marxian Association which I would suggest is the direct forerunner of the NZCP.

The second conference was held in the Trades Hall, Wellington, and we had by this time imported into New Zealand from Sydney a well known lecturer on Socialism by the name of Moses Baritz. He certainly made things hum in Wellington for a while, as he succeeded in baiting the opportunists on every occasion. However, he was deported after a short period during 1919....

EXTRACTS FROM "OUR FIRST MARXISTS" BY ALEX GALBRAITH, FOUNDATION MEMBER OF THE COMMUNIST PARTY.

The following excerpts from PV 30/10/57/ compels me to write thereof, so that Party members will realise that an ideological battle had to take place before we could form the Communist Party in New Zealand. The excerpt; " But the great revolution of Nov 7 proved the theory correct and inspired the formation in Christchurch of a Marxian Association to impart and circulate further theoretical works from the Soviet Union - then only two years old."

Well, Comrades, if it was left at that, most members of the Party would be deluded into thinking that real Marxists- both in theory and in practice - predominated at that conference, this was not so. For many years in NZ all sorts and types of socialists made their presence felt, especially during the "Red Fed" days from 1905 to 1914.

There were every brand of socialist - Utopian, Syndicalist, I.W.W., and Religious and Rformist types.

The main mining "camps" generally had tucked away some little group of Socialists (some sectarian groups also), some had classes on Marxian Economies, mostly teaching a stultifying type of Marxism, sneering at the battle of the trade unions for their everyday needs...

It was primarily this type (we called them "Armchair philosophers") that predominated at the Conference at Christchurch. It was like the struggle of the Bolsheviks and Mensheviks in Russia, from 1903 to 1912, only up and until 1920, in NZ, the NZ Mensheviks were the majority - that was why they called the Asoociation a Marxist Association.

I can tell you that some of us were "jumping mad" at them for not coming out as a Communist Party. Old Bill Wood and I repudiated them, nevertheless we formed a Literature Association and distributed and sold a lot of the literature they actually imported. We were in Napier at that time and had a well balanced group.

This literature was their undoing in two ways: 1. Among it was the real Leninist Marxist analysis of the State and the Renegade Kautsky- this knocked the stuffing out of the mechanical "Marxists"! And then on top of it, 2. Was the declaration of the Government banning, confiscating, and declaring it all seditious - this scared hell out of these "legal" Marxists! and they soon, with few exceptions, vanished into their former little admiration groups.

The field was then clear for those whom you might say were trying to be Bolsheviks, and thus from Wellington, Auckland, Christchurch, Napier, Huntly and other places groupings calling themselves Communists were formed and the first conference held in Wellington. Our late Comrade Bill Wood was our delegate from Napier at that historic conference - he was secretary of our branch and I was chairman of the same.

I do not think that any Communist Party was formed in any country without terrific ideological struggles. I know it was so in Australia as well as in New Zealand. We learnt that talkers and readers were sterile. As Lenin said 'Practice without theory is blind and theory without practice is sterile'

I have only given here a synopsis. I have not time to deal adequately with same at present.

COMMUNIST PARTY PUBLICATIONS OVER THE YEARS

the Communist	1924-26
the Vanguard	1926-29
the Red Worker	1929-33
the Workers Weekly	1933-39
the Peoples Voice	1939-present. (suspended during WW 2)

During the war years, till 1943, there was an underground Party press comprising such papers as the "Industrial Worker" and "In Print". The Peoples Voice printery was physically smashed by the state forces at the beginning of World War Two.

This booklet has been published by the Canterbury District of the Communist Party in commemorating the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the Communist Party of New Zealand. It is not an official history of the Party, but rather a summary of events that have happened since the working class first took up the struggle against the capitalist class in this country.

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